

# Kunapipi

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## Poems

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## Poems

### Abstract

RIVER OF POEMS

BIRDS NOT SINGING

LATE RETURN

IDEAL THIRD WORLD NEW MAN

UNDER THE CITY

HISTORY

SUMMER ON A DOUBLE DECKER BUS WITH THE BEAUTY

THE DARK FROG PRINCE

YOU'RE KISSING ME AGAIN

### Authors

Bruce Cudney, Irene Gross McGuire, Monty Reid, E. A. Markham, James Berry, Stephen Watson, and Mark Macleod

# Bruce Cudney

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## RIVER OF POEMS

write no poems to me today  
do you write poems to a woman  
                    crying in rape  
you came gently with poems  
                    once

walked my banks  
made love under my trees  
swam in my clean body  
you wrote poems  
as lovers write poems

say nothing to me now  
pass over me on your high  
                    bridges

turn your face  
from my dissipation  
build your factories about my  
                    hills

dump your garbage    your urine  
                    your feces    into me  
cut the flesh from my banks  
that you may twist me to your use  
tell in your houses of laws  
how you will restore me

do not let me hear it  
kill me with your poisons  
but write no poems to me  
the stars sang in me  
a thousand years  
before the poets came  
they will sing again

# Irene Gross McGuire

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after loving:  
we face the night  
back to back

behind the reeds  
a blue heron  
gathers time

rainy morning:  
dusting books  
I find old tears

dusk  
a soap opera  
flickers on the snow

Thanksgiving morning  
the river carries  
a cargo of shadows

New Year's morning:  
cold sunlight fills  
the empty glasses

snowblind...  
a whisper  
shatters dawn

dusk on the Rio Napo  
a thousand voices  
pierce the mosquito net

evening snowstorm  
dulls the city skyline —  
an icicle shatters

# Monty Reid

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## BIRDS NOT SINGING

We have not yet learned to hate  
ourselves well enough. The bird  
with pale breast feathers leans  
towards a mirror hung in his cage.  
A boy is coaxing him to sing.  
He taps a bell, whistles, and the bird  
flaps against the plastic-coated bars.  
Stupid bird the boy says.

In a basement room the boy  
is crying. For himself his father  
says. For myself says the boy, knowing  
nothing he says is true. I hate it  
all: school, the meals you cook,  
the books you want me to read,  
this bird not singing.  
Look at how he yanks the feathers  
from his chest.

They settle  
on the floor, on newspaper covered  
with shit and husks and gravel, shapeless  
down plucked from close to the body, so  
light any movement in the room  
catches it and it almost flies.

the bird sleeps, puffed, the air  
retained by its body. The father  
sits at a window that looks out onto  
a street where snow is falling in hard  
dry flakes the cars catch and scatter,  
only there is so much of it  
eventually the traffic stops.

He is thinking of prisoners, those  
jailed because there is a world that does  
not want to change: Brutus, Ngugi,  
Timmerman; for what their words  
can do to men who do not hate themselves  
well enough, who have pistols and electricity  
and say tell us everything. Talk.  
The father is thinking of how they  
slept, in cold cells, expecting  
to be dead. He is thinking  
of how they have probably never  
seen snow.

Late, he goes to watch his son  
sleep, stopping in the doorway  
with the hall light on. The bird  
flutters in its cage but the boy  
is still, his breath steady against  
the wall he turned to in anger  
as his father walked from the room  
earlier, turning the pain in on himself.  
What can I do to love you he says,  
standing in the doorway. In the morning  
there will be snow and you will not know  
I stood here, as if I was afraid  
you'd escape, as if I could avoid this,  
everything I've done, all the old  
burdens invented again  
and again.

And even the father sleeps, though  
he does not expect it, it falls on him  
like feathers at the bottom of a cage.  
And they have all slept the same  
sleep, the bird with its need  
to hurt itself, the boy's anger, men  
with their words. What can you  
say about this sleep except that it  
is done and we awoke and dreamed  
nothing. We never dream.

Is that what a boy wants on a morning  
crisp and white as new sheets  
and he is the first one to leave  
the house. When the trees are puffed  
up with hoar frost and the father  
watches him: new boots, new snow.  
How last night, his shadow in the square  
of light falling into the room, a  
feather lifted from the cage by a current  
he could not feel come through the open  
door, feel silently, relentlessly,  
towards him.

# E.A. Markham

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## LATE RETURN

(for Howard Fergus)

'What an odd name, Markham, for a Montserratian!' Canadian tourist in Montserrat.

'There is no Markham in the Directory.' Telephone Exchange.

i

The ruin, at least, was something, the yard  
with face half-rutted, was the boy no girl would kiss  
except in retrospect; blotches of soil erupting  
like teenage lust: a tangle of green — sugarapple,  
mango, sour now, outgrowing the graft of family name;  
other fruit, near-fruit...

With no young scamp to lizard vertical for juice,  
your nuts are safe: weeds cling  
in parody to trunk (like boys born after you, tall.  
Or long-abandoned sons made good, defying dad  
to wish them better) unharnessed  
by Nellie's line on which the great, white  
sheets of the house would flap their wings in rage.  
Fringed Afro of arrogance:  
their better view of the sea taunts us, close  
to earth, flaunting fruit too high to get at;  
some beyond-the-milk stage bunched as if in decoration.  
Well before dark, my challenge from below, half-



remembered, no-more-to-be-taken-up, peters out:  
mine is a garden, not of Eden, but of youth.  
Suspecting things to be as honest, as accurate as they seem,  
that this bit of family, untended, past its best  
season, reflects something in me, I reach  
for the camera I don't possess. Someone in Europe,  
in America, will find this quaint. For me; a tourist-  
polaroid to arrest decline.

ii

I am home again, perhaps two generations late.  
I think, when the jumble of accusation, of longing,  
clears: I am the juvenile not yet exiled.  
This rock is a springboard  
into water, into sea.  
Sea is safe mattress  
for the pole-vaulter, beyond sand;  
my ocean-liner, vast and reliable, absorbing  
shock, proof of completed journeys near to risk,  
knowing the way to 'abroad'. The jump  
is voluntary as coming to a road which forks:  
sudden pressure from behind makes you choose  
without benefit of signpost. Now this:  
Montserrat has caught up with the world,  
impatient of late-comers, of its children, foreign-ravaged,  
straggling home without humility. (High-flying  
Concorde boxing people's ears, is enough.)  
Others have been unpersoned  
through the idiocies of politics. I, who seek no public  
cut to advancement, am an economic  
not a political dissident.

Familiar picture: Man & suitcase,  
contents not from this place; professional migrant  
eyeing the landscape. My unpaid guide tells a story  
of a potato-patch, a villa-patch cleared  
too soon. A riot of green is the penalty.  
Less young in energy, we must try again.

Later, second thoughts come to the rescue  
 and puncture self-conceit: things affecting you  
 affect not only you, etc. 'Most of what matters  
 in your life takes place in your absence' is a verdict  
 with the threat drained out. (In that absence, woodlice  
 ate your house.) But something of you  
 lives here, a voice not heard in twenty years,  
 stubbornly locked in the present. The mind,  
 like a cat's paw, tries to trap stray cloud of memory,  
 mists of past, raindrops thrown by an unseen hand...  
 Inevitably, it locates you in the third person.

Is he a late developer?

He was sure of it, then, hot afternoons  
 stumped by Latin homework, bowled by the Physics  
 master before he took guard, before he was ready.  
 At home, out of the team, without Excursion  
 to Antigua to represent the School, he had to make do  
 with books; books one day, hopefully, to be swapped  
 for passport. Here, he watched the ants

materializing from nowhere

to attack the remains of lunch. He thinks —

*Regam Reges Reget...*: Such communication systems grow out of...  
*Amabam Amabas Amabat* (Uncomfortable, the imperfect tense)  
*Amavero Amaveris Amaverit...*

(What is the consequence if I do not kill these ants?)

His colleagues half-way to Antigua to play the big match,  
 he imagines he sees them, ants on the boat. He can  
 advise them. Ivan's late-cut is dangerous. At trials,  
 Ivan *twice* cut the ball in the air, and got away with it:  
*five runs*. Ivan will be caught in Antigua before he scores...  
*Capio Capere Cepi Captum...* Were we ants, boys  
 from School, we would find a way  
 to cross sea,  
 get message to Ivan. These ants, he notices,  
 place information above life: what drives them to it?  
 Could it be they love one another? Too foolish

a notion for a boy early in his teens  
who didn't make the team, and must settle for Latin:  
*Amavi Amavisti Amavit...*

He thinks:  
after the bombs, will the ants be here?  
(Maybe he has not become a scholar  
to sustain such thoughts.) He thinks of a passport  
stamped, stamped in Antigua, stamped in the next island,  
stamped here; luggage searched, questions asked,  
and is not ashamed of the obvious:  
Absence of love. We haven't learnt from the ants.

iv

Again the question: do I unpack?  
(Releasing echoes of Wanderer, of Seafarer, of Salesman,  
1st Generation immigrant hawking nicknacks  
at the door? Do I hope to dazzle  
for an hour, a week, and move on? Isn't it here  
that others, with my history, have under-estimated  
their capacity for low goals?)

To unpack or not? The case represents  
all the skill I have, success, over the years  
of reducing the contents of many into one —  
like absorbing disciplines into a single brain  
(Nellie must have felt this way, here, after the first  
cassava-bread: Reaping the root, peeling, washing,  
grinding at the Mill — man & boy treading pole —  
the white, poisonous cassava piling up in its box, its coffin...  
Over-night Press, sifting, baking on hot plate:  
thin, light cassava-bread...) What of this remains  
in my case?

The opened case, inevitably, won't close.  
A moment of panic: Could the fart of Concorde  
on its way to Venezuela, have got into your things?  
No, this is man-menopause, faking new consciousness.

I no longer wish to prevent bits of Montserrat  
smuggling in

though night sounds of crickets and dogs weigh nothing,  
bats no longer have a house to be blind in;  
Scots at the Agouti, Canadians at Vue Pointe  
travel lightly in my head. The biography that grows  
and grows in my baggage, started life a pamphlet, an underlined  
name, a literate slave at Riley's reading the declaration  
of emancipation. Nimcom has filled the years  
since 1834, and my case won't close.

And more: Under the bathtowel, samples of beaches  
still free to all. Here and there, memory of kindness,  
of beauty, verbs of local colour TO DANCE TO SING — TO LOVE?  
They belong here: is it crude of me to smuggle them  
into that dark place where part of me still lives?

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# James Berry

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## IDEAL THIRD WORLD NEW MAN (for a Caribbean Leader)

Arms raised he stirs exultation  
beyond rotten roots that renewed him  
the sad god of poverty who grew secretly  
obsessed with strange identities  
to risk the shocks of bluffs of blood  
man with a thorny head of subjugation  
who found himself among low lying hideaways  
yet grafted glorious eyes of success  
he practised how to breathe in cash  
how to move in it and gesture with it  
he drilled himself in other languages  
drilled himself to saturate conquerors  
till every day began to reflect him  
as a swordsharp machete  
and he strung little victories together  
like stepping stones  
and this  
upsurge of nonconforming  
is all-real  
to trouble establishments like a flier from Mars  
to make actions into polished milestones  
and tossed words ride ocean waves  
and missions clothe naked absences  
to empty banks into empty pockets  
and the world knows him a fresh agitator  
our eye and target of the nation

Listen  
hear him announced: 'Here he is  
knower of tracks to every fireside

sound sleeper on bare boards  
 good company on parched corn and water for dinner  
 the bringer  
 of new dimensions  
 new textures before the eyes  
 and bodies growing scarless  
 our sage  
 who brightens blackness  
 our floods on dry time  
 our builder after hurricane  
 our own man who talks «roots talk»  
 as well as «professor talk»  
 who finds the lost  
 who wakens the dead and all beginners  
 who is hard transparent glass  
 with deep reds and blues  
 our leader  
 here he is here he is  
 our man with eyes all round the head'



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**ADDRESS** G.D. Killam, Editor, World Literature Written in English, University of Guelph, Guelph, Ontario, Canada, N1G 2W1.

# Stephen Watson

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## UNDER THE CITY

Under the city  
the real life runs  
secretly pounding  
the blood's old drum;  
it's there beneath  
that all lives meet  
who diverge above,  
separate, discreet.

That man who passes,  
sidestepping, shy,  
there murders all  
before his eyes;  
the labourers labouring,  
exhausted, tamed,  
there rape the ladies,  
torture, maim

The limbs, the lives  
they often curse  
but never could  
begin to pierce;  
and all this flesh  
of every sullen hue,  
there is bludgeoned  
black and blue;

And all lives divided  
that stare you through,  
there meet their other,  
pay what's due

for passing, re-passing,  
with their skew stare  
past those who cast back  
one more dead glare.

— It's this that makes  
these streets unreal,  
the facades facades,  
that makes eyes steal;  
it's this, not commerce,  
not the traffic flow  
that animates these lives,  
drives them below

To where the real life  
has its secret way,  
where the dream behind it  
has full sway  
and all are coupled  
by the same ill:  
rejected, rejecting,  
man wants to kill.

## HISTORY

Perhaps it was some fault in him,  
one which he could never fathom,  
that he could never once believe  
what others said must surely be,  
that the dawn at last was coming  
and with its millenium bringing  
an end to history, that ill time  
of repeated misery, perpetual crimes.

Perhaps it was from a fault in him  
which he went on and on repeating



that he foresaw the longed-for dawn  
as merely prisoner of another dusk,  
that he knew only man would prevail  
still ignorant, injuring, failing,  
that man would endure, like him,  
as that creature always ailing.

Perhaps it was this fault in him  
that he could never fathom them,  
that he saw that dream of others  
as mere reflex of a wretchedness,  
that he saw that mania for its own  
end, history's bloodiest passion,  
never leading to a bloodless dawn,  
but to a misery, teaching compassion.

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# Mark Macleod

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## SUMMER ON A DOUBLE DECKER BUS WITH THE BEAUTY

*You are whistling she says to me You  
are beautiful inside.*

Down the centre of the bus  
I'm fighting their armpits  
sharp as a privet hedge.

*You can be outside, too.* She tells me  
about tissue-firming thought  
and how my eyes will sing  
for life.

The turbanned and hairless head,  
her powdered neck, return  
to her notes. I think as I pass  
she arranges parcels and legs  
around the threadveined knees.  
*I am Miss Finland nineteen thirty  
three* she says, almost breathless  
with the heat, *and I know.*

## THE DARK FROG PRINCE

I have opened my door  
to the dark frog prince.  
He has eaten at my table.  
I have searched out  
the crying whites of his eyes  
in his cot in the night.

He has slept on my pillow.  
I have borne for him,  
with no right,  
the gush of shopping women  
*Come here you gorgeous bar  
of dark chocolate: I  
could eat you!*  
I have kissed him.  
I have preferred him  
to the surprising  
child of my body;  
I have thrown him against the wall.  
I have forgotten he is a prince;  
he is a frog.

## YOU'RE KISSING ME AGAIN

You're kissing me again  
it's spring and I'm  
striding upside down  
in ditch water.  
All winter long we've killed  
the house with our watching silence,  
I've been talking  
to the soft nails of snow on my tongue.  
I've let secrets  
blow with the clouds  
like a burst of my own language  
in a country of strangers,  
but now the sky is blue  
and pointless and I can't wait:  
though you say you're coming out,  
I'm going to bring  
these words indoors.